

regional differences. New Orleans is an example of how intense differences can be within even a single region. The vast parades of New Orleans are a specifically urban Mardi Gras. The rural areas of southwestern Louisiana provide a very different Mardi Gras experience.

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*See also* Catholicism; Easter; Humor and Rituals; Inversion, Rites of; Music; Performance, Ritual of

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## Marriage Rituals

Marriage perhaps involves rituals more elaborate than those of any other life event in most cultures. The bewildering variety of such rituals makes generalizations difficult, but placing the rituals in their larger cultural context shows some similar features in their functions and symbolisms. Because in preindustrial cultures religion covers all spheres of life, most marriage rituals there place the sexual and economic aspects of marriage also in a religious context, celebrated and perpetuated by ritual practices.

Marriage is a universal institution, but defining it adequately presents a challenge. One authoritative definition focuses on perhaps the most common characteristic—children: “Marriage is a union between a man and a woman such that children born to the woman are recognized legitimate offspring of both parents” (Royal Anthropological Institute 1951, 110). Other definitions generally emphasize that the marital union is socially and legally recognized and establishes a family as a social unit that regulates sexual activity, produces and raises children, implies some reciprocal rights between the spouses and between them and their offspring, and constitutes a basic economic unit. In short, marriage could be seen as a set of rights that gives access to the spouse’s sexuality, labor, and property, although not all of these aspects are necessarily present in all marriages.

Anthropological literature on rituals places marriage in the category of life crises because it marks a transition from one phase of life to another. Indeed, in many cultures it is the most important rite of passage into adulthood. In most cases it is a happy occasion, celebrated universally by music, dance, food, and drink. In India a flute starts playing early in the morning a day or two before the wedding day, and continues for two or three days, changing tunes at appropriate times, and people sing specially composed songs. In a Zapotec (ancient Mesoamerican civilization) wedding ritual in Mexico a band of musicians plays from early morning on the wedding day throughout the ceremonies, which last until early next morning. Special messengers invite key people to the wedding, people hold processions between the bride’s and the groom’s house, the village president’s house, the godfather’s house, and the church; people eat four special meals, and two men stage “the dance of the turkey,” each holding a turkey by its wings (with its feet on the floor) and dancing from the patio to a village-road intersection, joined by two women carrying baskets. There are fireworks, candles, gifts, and candies and cookies.

Elaborate rituals are typical in traditional, preindustrial societies that practice arranged marriage and that establish large kinship groups as major economic and political units. Modernization tends to increase secularization and correspondingly to decrease the ritualistic dimensions of the marriage event. Symbolically, however, even in Western societies vestiges of rituals connected with ancient customs remain, such as asking for the prospective bride’s hand and giving away the bride.

## LOVE MAGIC

**The use of magical means to win the affection of a man or woman is common across cultures. The following is an extreme example of a magical technique used by desperate men in Central Thailand.**

The use of dangerously polluted material in love magic occurs when a man resorts to the strongest magical means known to ensure the love of a woman. It entails putting but a single drop of *namman phraaj*, the fluid which magical practitioners extract from certain corpses, in the food of the woman. Upon swallowing the food, she will become totally enslaved to the man. This occurs only rarely, because *namman phraaj* is rare. Only a specialist with great magical powers will try to obtain the liquid from the corpse of a person who died inauspiciously, preferably from the most dangerous kind of corpse: that of a woman who died whilst pregnant or during childbirth. Reputedly, in the deep of the night the lay magical specialist approaches the place where such a corpse lies. He should grasp the dead body firmly in his arms, and extract some liquid from the skull by holding a lighted candle under the chin of the cadaver. A terrible struggle may ensue before the corpse releases some of this *namman phraaj*. The liquid is extremely dangerous, and in present times there are only a few men who are reputed to possess it. Only a desperate man will try to use it as love magic, for whilst it certainly causes a woman to be enslaved to a man, it may make her very ill at the same time. It is said that she may become mentally deranged for the rest of her life by consuming some of the liquid.

*Source: Terweil, Barend J. (1975).*

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### Rituals Leading to Marriage

Rituals of marriage begin long before the actual wedding ceremonies. Whether the bride and groom fall in love or someone makes the match, meeting involves ritual. Dress, makeup, hairstyles, ornaments, and other efforts to enhance personal appearance are often ritualistic efforts to attract the opposite sex, as are flirtations of various kinds. Young men in the Trobriand Islands of the southwest Pacific Ocean may decorate themselves with Johnson's Baby Powder, and girls like to put flowers in their hair or a garland around their neck. Nuer youth around Sudan in Africa attend dances and afterward sit in the tall grass around the dancing ground and exchange endearments, the young men flattering their girlfriends, who are "decked with flowers and ornaments and anointed with oil for dancing" (Evans-Pritchard 1951, 52). In another context a Nuer young man leaps behind his oxen to show his masculinity and chants poems to the girl, especially if he is interested in marrying her. Courtship may not lead to marriage—most young

people have several such relationships—but it is recognized as a prelude to marriage. Parents have a final say to approve the marriage, and usually no objection is voiced if the man owns cattle.

Arranged marriage is sometimes characterized as parents choosing a set of in-laws. The attention is not as much on the feelings of the prospective marital partners as on the kin network that is established or that has to be maintained by the impending marriage.

The matchmaker is most often the father of the bride or of the groom (often at the prompting of the mother), a maternal uncle, or some other trusted person—often a Brahman (a Hindu of the highest caste traditionally assigned to the priesthood) or a barber in traditional Indian cultures. The transaction begins with negotiations between the parents. The young people may or may not know one another or meet at this stage. In one tradition in Upper Egypt a potential mother-in-law comes to the house of the bride-to-be to assess her suitability. Love marriage is considered irrational and therefore suspect, although young



A Jewish bride and groom dance the hora—a traditional Israeli folk dance—with friends and family at their wedding reception.  
COURTESY OF MARCY ROSS.

people increasingly meet at universities or work places, fall in love, and demand and get their way.

In the warrior culture of the Sambia of Papua New Guinea an ideal warrior—one who ideally has killed another human—captures a woman, steals a wife from the enemy tribe. For the !Kung of the Kalahari Desert of South Africa, however, killing two large animals suffices to define a man as an adult who is ready to marry. The man asks his parents to arrange a marriage. He may be ten years older than his prospective bride, most likely a teenager. The girl's parents also stress the demonstrated hunting ability of their prospective son-in-law because the hunter whose poisoned arrow hits the animal first receives the hide, which is used to make pubic coverings for both men and women.

In the !Kung society and in many others, furthermore, parents may arrange a son's marriage during infancy—sometimes before the prospective bride is born. The marriage is then consummated and celebrated when the spouses come of age. This custom usually occurs in societies in which cousin marriage is considered ideal; it ensures that the wealth stays in the extended family.

### Premarriage Rituals

Courtship customs (or their absence, e.g., seclusion of the sexes practiced in some Islamic societies) have a ritualistic character, but a series of more specific rituals usually starts when the relatives have agreed to the marriage. The first stage is the formal betrothal. In a Yoruba community in Nigeria, representatives



An American bride and groom in traditional wedding attire perform a Celtic hand-wrapping ceremony as part of their marriage ritual in 2001. COURTESY OF BECCI SEARLE-SCHRADER.

of the man's lineage gather at the compound of the woman's lineage. They offer kola (a beverage made from the seed of the kola tree) and other refreshments, perhaps even some money. The woman's representatives share these to show their acceptance of the betrothal. In Christian betrothals there, the man presents his fiancée with a Bible and a gold wedding band. This custom is not much different from a U.S. engagement in which the man presents a ring to his prospective fiancée as he proposes to her. In Africa, however, the man does not kneel in front of the woman, as is the idealized custom in the United States.

A bridal shower is a special prenuptial tradition in the United States. A close friend or relative invites a group of friends together as a surprise to the bride. The friends gather in an informal atmosphere in someone's home and "shower" the bride with small personal or household items that she will need as a married woman. This custom has both functional and symbolic meanings as the woman is about to enter a new phase in life. Games played during the evening often symbolize the bride's fertility and future reproductive role. The groom's friends organize a sometimes rowdy bachelor party that symbolizes the end

of the groom's freedom, independence, and responsibility solely for himself. Lately, both the prospective bride and groom may attend the wedding shower, and some women organize bachelorette parties for the bride.

The Yoruba betrothal marks the transfer of rights to the woman and the beginning of a series of obligations between the two lineages. The man now calls the woman his wife and has sexual relations with her. He also presents gifts of agricultural produce or money to her father or helps in some labor each year until the woman moves to her husband's home. This phase takes place when the bridewealth (wealth transferred from the groom's family and kin to the bride's family) is completely paid off. The ceremony marking this point in the process is also celebrated with gifts and refreshments.

### Tying the Knot

Marriage is a contract in most cultures, defined by either tribal laws or the laws of modern nation-states and recognized by the public. A ritualistic signing of the contract in the presence of witnesses and/or religious or civil authorities is part of most wedding ceremonies. In a temple wedding in India the officiating Brahman fills out the temple marriage register that has been signed by the groom and witnessed by at least one other important person, such as a village president.

Common expressions such as "tying the knot" illustrate the solidity and permanence of this contract, and the exchange of rings in Western cultures becomes a physical symbol of the bond. Historical records show that even in clandestine marriages in medieval England that were performed without clergy, some ritual was involved, including witnesses, gifts, and sometimes a wedding ring. Church weddings involved vows, blessing of the rings, and a public ban (legal or formal prohibition) read several weeks ahead of time to preclude any objections to the marriage.

Wedding ceremonies generally include a public declaration that confers a new status to the spouses as mature adults. The officiating clergy declares the couple as husband and wife by "the authority vested in me" by the state, witnesses must sign the contract, wedding bells ring, and pictures may be printed in the newspaper to mark the event. Thus, even in religious ceremonies there is a secular authorization by the state, and the public is given a chance to voice its

objections if necessary. "To be marriage, the institution requires public affirmation" (Cott 2000, 1).

The degree of formality in marriage contracts and associated ceremonies, however, ranges from none at all among the Inuit of northern Alaska and Western cohabiting couples to several days of transactions and celebrations among people in many parts of the world, such as Mexico, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. The Nuer carry out an official, public marriage ritual in three basic stages that are spread over several months—the betrothal, the wedding, and the consummation—and some additional ceremonies complete the marriage contract years later. In many preindustrial societies marriage involves a long process.

Symbolic rituals are used to express the new unity of the couple. In many U.S. weddings the bride and groom together light a unity candle. *Tali*-tying is a common ritual in India, and in some ceremonies the bride's father ties the couple's right hands together with a scarf. In a Tamil Brahman wedding seven steps taken by the couple around a sacrificial fire make the marriage binding, although other ceremonies take place as well. This symbolism apparently is more prevalent in cultures that emphasize marital unity—or where the law dictates what a marriage is; many other cultures focus more on alliances among and between kin groups than on the special relationship between the spouses.

### Symbolic or Unusual Marriages

Symbolic marriages extend the meaning of marriage beyond the usual union between a living man and a living woman. The Nuer practice a "ghost marriage" in which a male kinsman marries a woman in the name of a man who died before having any heirs, and the bride is thus legally the ghost's bride. In northern Japan a memorial practice of a "bride-doll marriage" emerged during World War II in which the soul of someone who has died before being married—represented by the dead person's picture in a glass box—is married to a spirit spouse embodied in a consecrated figurine in the same box, a doll "which is believed to have been animated with the miraculous power of Jizo, a prominent Buddhist Bodhisattva [deity]." The "couple" is enshrined in the temple from five to thirty years, during which "Jizo is believed to guide the dead person, stranded between worlds, toward successful rebirth and eventual salvation" (Schattschneider 2001, 854).

Another example of a symbolic marriage is a token prepuberty marriage in central India in which a physically immature girl is “married” to an object such as an arrow from a tribal group or a wooden rice-pounder. One of her male relatives acts on behalf of the object, and the event is celebrated for two days with ceremonies that involve all other rituals except gifts. The girl will later have a regular marriage, but not going through the ceremony before puberty makes the girl permanently unclean.

The Nuer also practice a form of marriage in which one woman marries another. The marriage rituals are the same as in a regular marriage, but the woman-husband gets a male kinsman or friend to beget children on her behalf and to assist in some chores. The woman who chooses to marry this way is usually barren and counts as a man; she may even marry several wives if she is rich, and her children address her as “father.” This is not the same as a homophilic marriage, a same-sex marriage, legalized so far only in Denmark, Greenland, Sweden, and Norway.

### Rituals Relating to Sexuality and Fertility

Sexuality is present in most marriages throughout the world, and the marriage bed is sometimes decorated for the wedding night, although in some cultures the couple are not supposed to engage in sexual relations the first night, or even for a while. Indian marriages employ a ritual bath for purification of both bride and groom, and they change into new clothing for the rest of the ceremony.

Although the bride’s femininity is usually emphasized in the marriage context, curiously in some cultures the bride must become masculine at least for part of the ceremony. In an old Tamil Brahman tradition on the fourth day of the wedding the bride was dressed up as a boy and made to speak to the bride-groom somewhat rudely. Sambia grooms first see their brides in a group ritual. The brides are dressed in bark capes and lie flat, their faces on the ground, while the grooms, in full warrior garb, stand stiff and cast their stony faced gazes to the sky. Looking at the women’s faces would contaminate them and show their inner panic. They have been isolated in young men’s clubhouses, engaged in prescribed homosexual activities, so marriage with its heterosexual contact is a new and scary experience; it takes some time before the marriage is consummated. To make the transition easier, the bride’s dress is similar to that of the boy ini-

tates in the clubhouse. When the groom finally has sex with his wife—after her menarche (the onset of menstruation) ceremony—he must perform a nosebleeding after each menses of his wife to purify himself of the pollution created by having sex with a woman.

Sexuality is also part of the requirement in Islamic and Christian cultures that the bride be a virgin. Among the Kanuri people in northeastern Nigeria, virginity of the bride is the ideal; a virgin bride is considered prestigious and commands a high price, thus girls often have to marry older men who can afford them. In most societies a double-standard allows a man to have premarital or extramarital sex, but the woman must be a virgin at marriage and faithful to her husband afterward. Sambia men normally continue their homosexual relations for some time, but the birth of the first child confers a full status to men as fathers and requires them to settle down. Thus, marriage and the onset of fatherhood constitute final rites of passage into manhood.

Symbols of fertility are part of marriage rituals everywhere. A bridal couple in the United States is often showered with rice—or lately bird seeds—as a symbol of fertility.

In India bamboo is considered such a symbol, so the wedding canopy is supported by bamboo poles, and a mango twist is tied together with the bamboo pole because mango, too, is associated with marriage and fertility. In many societies marriage is simply a continuation of the sexuality and fertility rituals that begin with puberty rites. These rites are society’s attempt to control sexual relations. It is in the society’s interest to channel sexuality toward reproduction.

### Economic Rituals

Marriage is everywhere also an economic transaction, and this aspect is observed ritually in many societies, especially those in which the kinship group is a major economic and political unit. Arranged marriage is the norm in such societies, and marriage negotiations between the two sets of kin focus on the financial aspects of the deal, often with mutual suspicion until understanding has been reached. Bargaining may continue even into the wedding festivities.

The best-known economic customs relating to marriage are dowry and bridewealth. Dowry is given to the woman from her parents as an advance on her inheritance, and it is hers, although often administered by her husband. In case of divorce, she will take

it with her. It establishes a conjugal fund. Dowry is most common in Asia and some European countries and generally in agricultural or pastoral societies. It reflects the status of the woman at marriage, and a good dowry can gain a desirable husband.

Bridewealth, on the other hand, is paid to the bride's family, in part to compensate it for the loss of a worker. Among the Nuer ideal bridewealth is forty cows, to be paid in installments, but few can afford such a high price. Bridewealth is often referred to as "brideprice," but that term may be misleading because most societies resent the idea that the woman is purchased. It is rather a form of circulating the wealth; the bride's brother can then pay his bridewealth at his marriage.

Bridewealth is more common in Africa, where most societies practice it. Dowry and bridewealth, however, need not be mutually exclusive; a combination is often used. The ritualistic part of these arrangements involves visits and negotiations between the two sets of kin and sometimes special displays of the items.

Other economic aspects of marriage include marrying within one's own social class—a concern for the rich even in Western societies to keep the wealth in the family. Cousin marriages in many societies, such as the Fulani in Africa, not only strengthen family ties but also solve the problem if the family has difficulty coming up with bridewealth. Research has shown that marriage between relatives is more frequent when there is scarcity of cattle; bridewealth demands appear to be reduced with close-kin marriage. It is also worth noting that in societies where polygyny is legal (one man with two or more wives), it is not practiced very widely because few men can afford several wives. As to wedding ceremonies, they are most elaborate with the first marriage; subsequent marriages may take place fairly quietly.

## Marriage Rituals in Times of Change

Marriage represents the launching of the most universal institution—the family. The rituals by which marriage is celebrated are as diverse as the cultures of which they are a part, but in various ways they all celebrate and strengthen the couple's unity and kin network. By their religious dimension they help reinforce the meaning of the event.

Old rituals are in danger of being gradually eliminated as more and more people around the globe emulate Western ways. At the same time, however,

there is a new appreciation of tradition, and many people—especially in the diasporas (scatterings of people)—seek to employ their native rituals in the celebration of life events, whereas others create new rituals and traditions. Wedding ceremonies are a rich part of cultural heritage and help establish the new family entity on a firm cultural footing. With increasing geographical mobility, change, and globalization, rituals give a sense of permanence and continuity that can provide a feeling of security and stability in times of social change.

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*See also* Gender Rituals; Passage, Rites of

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## Martial Arts

Martial arts include a wide range of practices from many Asian countries and religious traditions. They range from Chinese *wushu* (sometimes inaccurately called “kung fu”) to Korean *tae kwon do* and a variety of Japanese arts: karate, aikido, kendo, *iaido*, *naginata*, and judo. Almost all martial arts are connected with some religious or spiritual belief system, although their origins also lie in the practical need that people had to defend themselves without weapons.

The popularity of martial arts in the West seems to wax and wane depending on the current crop of action films and television shows. Some have become more like Western sports, with competitions, rankings, and scoring systems, whereas the appeal of others is the way they combine physical training with a more traditional focus on social, philosophical, and spiritual development. Some, such as *iaido*, a Japanese martial art using swords, are practiced by a relatively few skilled people. Others, such as karate and *tae kwon do*, are popular with schoolchildren and with women for self-defense.

The ancient origins of martial arts are thought to lie in religious combat rituals, imitating the gods who were able, according to myth, to triumph without weapons. Early styles in Japan were associated with the Japanese religion Shintoism and with Mikkyo, an esoteric form of Buddhism, and some forms of Chinese *wushu* are categorized as Daoist/Buddhist. Many martial arts developed within the confines of temples, which were places of refuge during the troubled periods when martial arts tended to develop most quickly. The temple of Shaolin, in China, for example, became a sort of university where martial arts experts lived together, shared their knowledge, and trained their students.

One aspect of the development of modern “sport” forms of traditional martial arts is the desire to eliminate the spiritual or mystical elements. This transformation—sometimes referred to as “sportification”—is intended to make martial arts more like Western sports, in which competing and winning are the only goals. For example, the idea of *chi* or *ki* (universal energy or breath concentrated in a person’s center) is basic to martial arts practice. This idea can be translated into physiological terms as the center of gravity, but in traditional practice *ki* is far more than a physical spot or force, and the *ai* in *aikido* can be translated as “harmony” or “love.”

Self-mastery and self-knowledge are important goals in martial arts practice, and the student is guided in a variety of ways in personal development as well as physical training. The practice of *zazen*, the basic seated meditation of Zen Buddhism, has been incorporated into a number of modern martial arts because it can easily be used out of context, without any demand on the student for a particular religious affiliation.

The practice of martial arts contains a variety of ritual elements. In *aikido*, the *dojo* (practice room) includes an altar with a photograph of the founder, Ueshiba Morihei (1883–1969), a scroll with calligraphy, and fresh flowers. Students bow to their instructor, to the photograph, and to one another, and in many clubs clap two or four times at the beginning